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NAH -O-ME: A Legend of the Skookum Chuck.

This story was told me by an old Indian woman as she sat in front of a small cabin in the Songhees Reserve. She was stripping soaked cedar roots into pliant strands for weaving the baskets her daughter sold to the tourists.

She was a very old woman, perhaps a hundred and fifty years old, perhaps only a hundred. She did not know herself. But she remembered the year of the great famine, when the salmon failed to appear, the clams disappeared from the beaches, and even the ducks died of a mysterious illness. And that was eighty years ago.

But she was not just another old squaw. Her face was lined and seamed and creased with a million wrinkles; her body was shrunken and the fingers that manipulated the roots were just brown skin and bone, so that she resembled an animated mummy. But she possessed an innate dignity, and a reserve that I had evercome only after many visits. For she was of royal lineage. Was not her father the Tyee Simyeal, the greatest chief of the Siwash nation? Did he not wear the crest, not only of the eagle, but also of the whale and the wolf and the bear so that his totem towered many feet above those of his rival chieftains? Was not his prestige so great that he could afford, at his potlatch, not only to give away but to destroy utterly, the heriditary coppers prized above all treasures by the chiefs and nobles? It was even so.

So we sat before her cabin and she talked to me in a mixture of mission English, Indian and Chinook which I shall not attempt to reproduce.

"It happened a great many years ago. I was a little girl, the daughter of my father's second wife. My father had no son to inherit his crests and his coppers, so when my sister Nah-o-me became of marriageable age he planned to give the biggest potlatch that had ever been known among all the Siwash tribes. Yea, even as far north as the country of the Haidas and the Tsimpsheans would the fame of this generosity be known. It was before the law was passed that decreed that the Indians should live upon reserves, and my father's village was by the Skookum Chuk--the narrow pass where the waters were so strong that even the great war canoes did not dare to venture except at full flood. When the tide was ebbing the waters raced and swirled and foamed between the steep rocky banks. At the turn the waters clashed so violently that a great whirlpool was formed, in the center of which driftwood was carried round and round, and any log or tree that was caught in it seemed to stand on end in the center. Only the strongest paddles were chosen to brave the Skookum Chuk, and they had to hug the shores. The women never ventured in their small dugouts as they did in the smooth waters of the Straits.

My sister Nah-o-me was very beautiful. Her eyes were as the eyes of a fawn and her hair was long as the streamers of the kelp that rose and fell with the tide. Her body was straight and slim as the willow sapling and already the young braves of the Saanich and the Cowichan and the Songhees and even the far-off Kuper Island clans were hunting and fishing to buy the blankets they would offer for her.

But she was not as other women of the tribe. From time immemorial our women had been accustomed to be sold to the highest bidder and redeemed and sold again and again by her father or brother. It was the law, and none thought to rebel.

But Nah-o-me refused.

"I will not be sold, as so much fish," she told my father. "I will chose my own mate."

A year passed and still she had not accepted any of the young men who came to our village. She had met and learned to love a young white trader from Fort Camosun, whose hair was the ~~xxxx~~ color of the rising sun and whose eyes were like the summer skies. He too was drawn to her and they talked together, shyly, in Chinook and the few words of Indian that he knew.

My father was very angry with Nah-o-me.

"It is not good," he said. "No white man means any good to an Indian maid. I have seen the girls of our nation leave their homes for the white man's, but they soon come back, with a child that is neither white nor Indian. The young Tyee Mahkwa, of the Cowichans, has offered two thousand blankets for you. You will be his wife. I have spoken."

In the days that followed messengers were sent to all the clans to tell of the great bridal potlatch that my father would give. The young men were set to fishing and hunting and the women prepared the stores of smoked salmon and clams and dried herring roe for the feast; masks were made for the dancing and the tribal singer prepared a new song. The great piles of new blankets and crockery and bright tin pans were ready to be given away th the guests. In a few days the feast would begin.

The young trader came to see my father.

"I am not a rich man," he said. "but I will give one thousand blankets for your daughter after the manner of your people. Then I will take her to the mission and we will be married by the priest, after the manner of my people, Let Nah-o-me choose."

"No", said my father. "It is our custom to accept the highest offer. The Tyee Mahk-wa is chief of a rich and powerful tribe and would bring out his war canoes if I should so affront him."

So the young man departed.

The old woman paused awhile, picked up a long stemmed clay pipe, filled and lit it. She puffed at it a few moments, calmly and daintily, then laid it down and continued:

"T "The bridal potlatch was set for the full moon of October. The day arrived and everything was in readiness. Never had so great a store of gifts been massed in the memory of the tribe. The dower robe, a button blanket on which had been stitched one hundred five dollar bills, was laid out for the bride. The platform on which the speeches were to be made was erected and the young Tyee was ready there with his blankets beside him. My father told my mother to make Nah-o-me ready and she entered the house to do so.

But my sister could not be found. Not in my father's house, nor in any of the lodges. The women hunted and called, to no avail. My father's face grew stern as he thought of the loss of prestige that would be his at his daughter daughter's disobedience.

Then someone spied a tiny dugout on the waters of the pass. Nah-o-me! She had taken her own frail canoe and was paddling in the direstion of Fort Camosun. But already the tide was at full-ebb and soon the maelstrom would be forming. Already the swiftly flowing waters were drawing her to the whirlpool.

A wail arose among the women.

"Aie! The whirling waters will get her"---

Helplessly we watched. The small craft was drawn into the whirling, foaming pool-- was tossed about among the logs and driftwood and splintered like a match-box. We saw Nah-o-me struggling for a few minutes in the seething waters, then disappear as her body was drawn into the vortex.

No triumphal song was sung by the tribal singer that day. Instead, the women sang the mourning song as my father sadly made his potlatch to the invited guests.

A watch was kept for many days upon the shores but the whirlpool never gave up the body of my sister. It was said that she stood upright in the centre until her body melted away. But her spirit still lives in the Skookum Chuk, for when the October moon is full a white form can be seen rising from the waters and hovering over the centre of the whirling pool. The white men who now travel through the pass say the cloud is formed by the vapour that rises from the clashing tides

condensing in the cold October air. But we who lived beside the Skookum Chuk know wherefrom that spirit rises.

Note:

Many Indians were given Biblical names by the early missionaries, which were 'Indianized' later. 'Nah-o-me' was Naomi; 'Simyeal', Samuel: 'Mahk-wa', Mark; 'Ma-ith-a', Martha, etc. 'Tsimpshean' (Tsimp-she-an) was Ft. Simpson.

Potlatch -- a Chinook word meaning 'a giving away!.

Skookum Chuk-- Chinook, meaning 'strong waters'.

Coppers-- Copper beaten out into a thin curved plate and worn over the abdomen. It was highly prized by the Indians. Their ceremonial costume consisted of a girdle or breech clout of dyed cedar bark, a copper, and a blanket.

Button blanket-- a blanket, red or blue, with the tribal crest or totem outlined in pearl buttons.

Fort Camosun--Early name of Victoria.